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Digital survivors: Stick to your guns

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DIGITAL SURVIVOR

The title for this column, Digital Survivor, struck me the other day as being particularly apt for these times.

My intent with this column has always been to help people understand how they can take advantage of particular technologies, understand the impact of technological change on their working lives, or think about how technology will change their business. Based on e-mail from readers, it seems we are succeeding at that task.

And yet, having read several anti-dot-com articles recently, the phrase "digital survivor" brings another theme to mind. There are a lot of people whose careers are dependent upon information technology, and who are now feeling rather battered and bruised by the shift in opinion over the dot-com collapse.

There is no doubt that there is a lot of anger out there. Many people have been burned by their dot-com investments, the market is in a funk, and technology stocks seem to be a guaranteed ticket to the poor house. As we watch the fortunes of many dot-com millionaires around us crash and burn, there is no doubt a palpable glee emanating from some corners.

As the Boston Herald recently commented in an article focusing on the dot-com collapse, "Do you delight in the financial misfortunes of others? Of course you do."

And this line from U.S. columnist Dave Berry: "Nasdaq went deep into the toilet, which meant we heard a LOT fewer stories about 22-year-old dot-com twerps making $450-million for starting companies that never actually produced anything except press releases."

But just as the excitement about the dot-com era went to an extreme, the hype is now swinging to the other extreme. Listen to some pundits, and it would seem that the era of the Internet, information technology, e-biz and any other matter involving a computer chip is over.

Which brings us to the "survivor" issue. There are several million people in Canada whose careers are directly related to information technology.

Like me, they're getting a little tired of the dot-com bashing.

And yet in these times, to be a digital survivor, you must have a rather thick skin. Indeed, my skin has become so thick that I could be considered positively reptilian.

In 1982, I began suggesting that a tool called e-mail would change the way we worked, and that most of us would one day find it to be indispensable. At the time, remember, personal computers were barely in the workplace and people strongly advised me to get a life.

Of course today, the dot-com pundits are probably using e-mail to submit their columns.

Around 1987, I became immersed in the then-emerging concept of knowledge management. I became convinced, as did many, that there were extraordinary business benefits, if we could only electronically harness and capture the collective knowledge of our staff. Of course, my comments were often met by blank stares, and my business strategies were dismissed. Today? Knowledge management has become a billion-dollar business, and many organizations have been forever transformed.

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There are many other pioneers out there who, over the last 20 years, have witnessed a technology in its early days, came to realize its potential, and helped to work its magic into the corporate sector. Sticking to their guns and beliefs, they all became digital survivors.

Yet being a digital survivor doesn't just mean promoting certain information solutions ahead of your time. It also means being realistic about technology's potential and its role when things go to the other extreme.

In the past two years, I've ridiculed the intensity of the dot-com phenomenon many times, suggesting that things were getting out of hand. I got a lot of angry flame-mail telling me I was ruining the party.

Today, I hold my head up high, knowing I didn't succumb to the silliness, making me and many others across Canada, digital survivors.

It's time we end the dot-com bashing and say "enough already."

The fact is, the world of information technology marches on.

In light of this, we've got to continue to think of ourselves as digital survivors in these dark and perilous times. After all, this too shall pass.

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